DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 084 577 CS 500 460

AUTHOR Faulk, Arlene; Stetler, Cheryl
TITLE Communication in Organizations: The Communication Environment of a Task-Force Team.
PUB DATE Apr 73
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Communication Assn. (Montreal, April 25-29, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Organization; Business Administration; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Interaction Process Analysis; *Management Information Systems; Management Systems; *Organizational Development; *Organizations (Groups); Task Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *Organizational Communication

ABSTRACT

Changes in organizational structures, with less emphasis on bureaucracy, require new approaches to communication. One relatively new form of organization design is the "task force" or "project team" which is assigned to one specific short-term program, after which the team is dissolved and its members reassigned. A study of a project team in a research consultant organization was conducted in order to analyze its structure and methods of communication. Information from a questionnaire distributed to team members indicated, first, that they consider superior-subordinate relationships to exist for administrative purposes only and on a temporary basis, and, second, that decisions are made by both project leaders and individuals. Most of the interpersonal communication is by one-to-one conversations. The most important factors that "facilitate" their work are job autonomy (freedom from rigid supervision and freedom to make one's own decisions) and the availability of consultation and information exchange. However, a few team members felt that a lack of direction and control was a hindering factor, along with a lack of information about the project. These results indicate that in order to operate effectively a project team must allow its members to make decisions and conduct their own operations but must still provide a coordinator to insure the proper flow of information. (RN)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 084577

# COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS:

# THE COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT OF A TASK-FORCE TEAM

Arlene Faulk and Cheryl Stetler

University of Kansas

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Arlene Faulk
Cheryl Stetler
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Submitted for presentation at
the International Communication
Association convention, April,
1973 in Montreal, Canada

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

CS 500 460

## INTRODUCTION

Portents for the future in organizations indicate that forces of change in the modern world will bring new forms in organizational structures. Alvin Toffler speaks of "the coming ad-hocracy," and reviews the emerging alternatives to traditional bureaucracy.[1] Warren Bennis, consistently a forerunner in organizational theory and practice, discusses "the decline of bureaucracy" and new organizations of the future.[2]

Coupled with the forecast of new forms in organizational structures is the growing realization that a major concern for contemporary organizationalists is to consider and determine what structures and designs are best suited to particular tasks and needs. John J. Morse and Jay W. Lorsch emphasize that the appropriate structure of an organization "is contingent on the nature of the work to be done and on the particular needs of the people involved."[3]

If specialists in communication and management, organizational planning and administration are to keep abreast of developing trends in human organizations, certain questions and issues must be faced: What are the emerging new forms in organizational systems? What are the characteristics of such designs? What is the nature of the new working environments?

As Harold Leavitt points out, "we are really just beginning to reattack the structural problem after leaving it alone for many years."[4] If we could learn more about the operations of specific designs, we might be able to answer a key question in applied organizational theory: "What organizational designs are appropriate for what tasks?"[5]

### Project Teams

One new emerging form of organizational design and functioning is called the "task-force" or "project" team. Toffler believes these temporary work groups are the result of the increasing rate of change being forced on all types of organizations. An individual's relationship to any one structure is being shortened in time. The high rate of turnover in relationships is being symbolized by a rapid increase in "project" or "task-force" teams, assembled to solve specific short-term problems. He states:

> Today while functional divisions continue to exist, more and more project teams, task forces and similar organizational structures spring up in their midst, then disappear . . . (people) often retain their functional 'home base' but are detached repeatedly to serve as temporary team members.[6]

Project management has been widely used in the aerospace and construction industries for several years. Complete responsibility for the task, as well as all the resources needed for its accomplishment, is usually assigned to one project manager. When the project is complete, the team dissolves.[7]

Although project management is a way of life in the aerospace industry, it has not been in common use as an overall design within other settings. As the use of project and task-force teams becomes more prevalent, their design and function may take on many forms, depending on the needs and interests of individual organizations.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

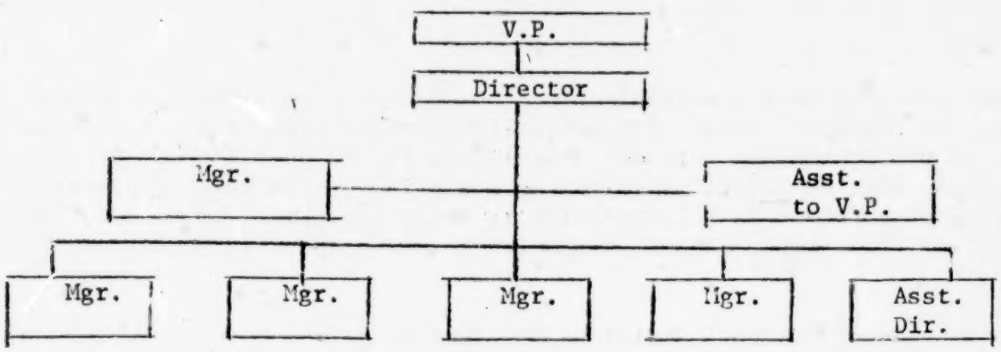
The purpose of this study is to descriptively analyze the structure and functioning of a project team operation. This exploration is only an initial pilot stage of research into new organizational designs and focuses primarily on communication variables.

## THE DIVISION UNDER STUDY

One division has been studied in an organization which is an independent, non-profit firm that conducts contract research for industry, government, and other private and public groups. The divisions in the organization perform both basic and applied research concerned with materials, health, environmental pollution, industrial technology, aerospace and defense, management sciences, systems analysis, public and urban affairs, and regional problems.

The specific division in this study has a unique functional design within the organization. Work functions on a permanent, task-force basis centered on numerous project teams operating at any given time. The projects undertaken usually last about a month, with several projects in progress at any given time. Any divisional member can be a project leader and for that particular project he is the "superior." He writes up a contract proposal and when it is accepted, he may ask individuals from the division to be on the task-force team, and occasionally people from other divisions. The project leader has responsibility for quality control, gathering data and personnel, and working directly with the client. Individuals usually work on more than one project concurrently, and may be the leader or "superior" of one, while a team member or "subordinate" of another.

The vice-president of the division, who is also the director, does not see any permanent subordinates in their project team design. Although a formal organizational chart does not exist, he sees the informal structure as:




He also believes that since all these people may be project leaders and members, the emphasis is "project-oriented" and on individual competency, rather than on a structured hierarchy. The managers are designated as such because of certain administrative responsibilities, such as budget, hiring and selling time for new projects. The projects are based on a time allocation with a designated number of hours devoted to each project.

## METHODOLOGY

Interviews were conducted with a staff member, who was the contact into the division, and the director to become familiar with the work situation. A self-report questionnaire was then constructed to obtain a description of the task-force design, according to the workers' own perceptions. It was then distributed to all research personnel within the division (N = 39).

The research instrument consisted of two parts: 1) a set of open-ended questions and 2) a request for critical communication incidents. The first part was subdivided into questions regarding decision-making, superior/subordinate relationships, communication channels, and facilitating and hindering work factors. The critical incident section required the subjects to report important communication behavior which they had directly observed in the progress of their work within the division. More specifically, they were to report both an incident which facilitated their work and one which hindered its progress. For the subjects' clarification, communication was defined as "the process of sending and receiving messages--through written or oral channels; upward, downward, or horizontal; in an interpersonal or group setting." Through use of this communication incident technique, more specific information could be obtained concerning the actual process of the task-force situation.

Eighty-two percent of the subjects responded to the questionnaire. Content analysis was employed to obtain appropriate categorizations and conclusions.

## RESULTS

### Superior/Subordinate Relationships[8]

All but one of the managerial level subjects (N = 7), indicated the division's director as their superior. In terms of subordinancy, most managers perceived the existence of permanent subordinates only for administrative purposes. Task-wise, subordinancy was seen as revolving around project teams in which the project leader held the position of temporary superior.

The non-managerial personnel (N = 24) presented a more diverse picture of their superior/subordinate relationships. Some of these subjects also perceived an administrative structure where matters such as budget and time allocation were the responsibility of designated superiors. The superior was sometimes designated as a manager. However, some subjects saw the director of the division as the only superior and then only in an administrative capacity; other non-managerial subjects did not perceive any authority structure except that revolving around the task-force design.

As for subordinancy, non-managerial personnel described it as temporary. It was also characterized as being a project member on a team, rather than the project leader.

### Locus of Decision-Making

The subjects' description of the decision-making process within the division is presented in Table 1.[9] Percentages represent that portion of subjects who placed some or all decision-making power within the specified category.[10]

TABLE 1

LOCATION OF DECISION-MAKINC

| Category of Personnel | Frequency of Designation | |
|---|---|---|
| Managers & Administration . . . . . | 55% | |
| Self . . . . . | 52% | |
| Project Leader . . . . . | 35% | (N = 31) |
| Shared (All Levels) . . . . . | 19% | |
| Client . . . . . | 10% | |

It is evident from the responses in Table 1 that many of the division's members perceive themselves as decision-makers. Frequently, this point was made in reference to a project team, either as being its leader or as a team member. Again, a distinction was made by the subjects, both managers and non-managers, between administrative decisions and technical, project-oriented decisions. The administrative decisions were seen as the responsibility of the managers and higher level personnel, such as the division director and assistant director. The project decisions were seen primarily as the responsibility of the project leader and/or team members, which could include any members of the division.

Communication Channels

In describing their work situation, twenty-three subjects reported an estimation of the percentage of communication time devoted to oral, written, and conference-oriented interaction. The results are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2

MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

| Medium | Mean Percentage of Communication Time | Range of Responses |
|---|---|---|
| Oral | 63% | 30% - 100% |
| Written | 20% | 0% - 60% |
| Conference | 17% | 0% - 50% |

(N = 23)

The remaining respondents did not report actual percentages but in general also indicated that any work time devoted to communication was primarily carried on through the oral medium--in face-to-face meetings or telephone discussions. These results pertain only to communication internal to the division.

Facilitating Factors and Positive Critical Incidents

Table 3 indicates the factors which were most consistently listed as facilitating the worker in doing his job.

TABLE 3

FACILITATING WORK FACTORS

| Factor | Number of Subjects Indicating the Factor |
|---|---|
| Job Autonomy | 14 |
| Consultation Availability | 12 |
| Unstructured/Informal Nature of the Division's Organization | 8 |
| Respect for Competency of Others | 7 |
| Friendly, Supportive Atmosphere of the Division | 5 |
| Cooperation Among Team Members | 4 |
| Change and Flexibility of the Division | 4 |

(N = 33)

"Job Autonomy" refers to both freedom from rigid supervision and freedom to make one's own decisions. As one subject suggested, the division provides an "'open area' in which contract research is performed: i.e., the chance to succeed or fail on your own merits or abilities."

"Consultation availability" refers to the presence of other personnel within the division who are willing to engage in information exchange regarding project problems. The other categories are self-explanatory.

Up to this point, all of the results presented were obtained from the open-ended portion of the questionnaire. The analysis of the critical incidents, however, also provided information concerning factors which facilitated the subjects' work situation, particularly communication factors.

The nature of critical incidents often makes interpretation extremely difficult. Many of the answers, as in this study, do not lend themselves to neat categorization; therefore, tabulated data and precise conclusions are difficult to obtain. What was evident, however, was that critical incidents generally reflected the factors mentioned within the "facilitating" concepts listed in Table 3. For example, the facilitative communication incidents often described the subjects' positive evaluation of information exchange within the division. Personnel felt free to approach one another for help concerning a problem or for general advice. The two examples below are illustrative of this type of response:

> A problem arose as to the source of certain information I required. I requested a meeting of those concerned at which time all parties cooperated in determining the most efficient method of transfering the data.

> Consultation with a senior staff member at the beginning of a project allowed me to draw on his expertise and experience in the field, which was helpful, even though he did not participate in the project itself.

Finally, two variables of interest due to their occurrence in both the facilitative and hindering communications incidents are: 1) clarity of role expectations, and 2) clarity of organizational goals. Each was mentioned as facilitating the work situation by three subjects.

## Hindering Factors and Negative Critical Incidents

In terms of the results from open-ended questions, Table 4 represents the factors which were most consistently seen as hindering the progress of work in the division. It should be noted that fewer subjects responded to this section than for the facilitating factors and, in general, their answers were more idiosyncratic.

TABLE 4

HINDERING WORK FACTORS

| Factors | Number of Subjects Indicating the Factor |
|---|---|
| Lack of Direction and Control | 9 |
| Lack of Information Regarding the Work Situation | 5 |
| Unstructured/Informal Nature of the Division's Organization | 4 |
| Lack of Information on Divisional Goals and Policies | 3 |
| Poor Physical Environment | 3 |
| No Hindering Factors | 2 |

(N = 29)

"Lack of information regarding the work situation" refers to communications concerning past, present and future activities primarily centering around the task-force operation. For example, one subject listed the following:

> Sometimes an inability to determine what colleagues were thinking or doing on a project, thus causing part of a study to be redone. Not being aware of work already done; new leads for business not always disseminated.

The category "lack of direction and control" included such variables as poor staff utilization and the lack of adequate priority-setting. Again the remaining categories are self-explanatory.

The negative communication incidents could not, in general, be categorized into frequency data. Two variables, however, that were often characterized as hindering factors, with six responses each, were: 1) the lack of clarity of role expectations, and 2) the lack of coordination of projects.

The only other commonality which ran through many of the responses was the perception of inadequate information exchange as a hindering factor in the work

situation. The best example of this is the following response:

> I was requested to prepare recommendations for the solution to a problem and then not advised that a decision had been made prior to completion of my work, and there was no need for further work on the task.

## DISCUSSION

General indications may be drawn from the results of the study in the areas relating to: 1) the overall organizational design of the division, and 2) the communication environment.

### Organizational Design

An unstructured/informal organization is recognized and verbalized by many divisional members. Some see it as a positive factor and some as a negative factor. Within this context, members have diverse views on the patterns of responsibilities between superiors and subordinates. This diversity revolves around administrative responsibilities, but not in direct reference to the project team operation. There is a consistent view in relation to the project team that the project leader is the only superior with respect to the team operation.

Job autonomy as a facilitating factor within this design had the highest number of responses from the divisional members, with 42%. The perceptions of this autonomy relate to seeing the design as unstructured and informal, since the respondents talked about job autonomy in terms of freedom from rigid supervision and freedom to make one's own decisions. Concomitantly, most divisional members talked about having decision-making responsibility in terms of "self", particularly as part of their responsibility as a leader and/or member of the project team.

The facilitating factors of change and flexibility also seem to support the members' perceptions of the informal organizational design.

### Communication

The major means of communication is oral (face-to-face). The responses were directed towards the amount of communication time devoted to oral, written and conference interaction, and not to the total amount of time spent communicating during the course of a day's work.

Most division members desire frequent interaction on many aspects of their job situation. For example, they desire consultation with other members of the division on technical problems and generally receive the response they are seeking.

Related to this information exchange is the perception of professional competency which members have for one another. In fact, most research personnel in the division are experienced and specialized in their areas before being hired. The friendly, supportive atmosphere and the perceived cooperation among team members seems to further characterize the facilitative nature of the communication environment of the division.

Some division members also mentioned factors in the communication environment that were hindering in the work situation and these seem to be different from the facilitative factors in the qualitative sense. The facilitative factors involved information exchange of a problem-oriented nature, centered around a specific project task, such as the availability of other personnel for consultation in which advice was offered for the solution of task problems. The hindering factors involved information exchange in a broader sense, concerning roles in two areas: 1) in terms

of the project team operation and 2) in terms of the overall operation of the division. For example, a number of subjects perceived a lack of information regarding the day-to-day operation of the task-force team--who is doing what or what has been accomplished. A few others indicated a lack of information on general divisional goals and policies.

Both positive and negative factors were elicited from the subjects concerning their work situation. In some cases, therefore, it was possible that a factor listed as facilitative by one subject was seen as hindering by another. This is true for the following variables: organizational goals, structural nature of the organization and role expectation. More specifically, for some subjects their role expectations were quite clear, while for others, such expectations were ambiguous. It must be noted that such results give no indication of the relative importance of negative versus positive responses. Further research is required to clarify this aspect of the issue.

## SUMMARY AND SPECULATION

Since this was an initial stage of research, it was not our intention to establish firm conclusions regarding the operation of the target research division. Rather, it was our purpose to become familiar with the basic characteristics of an organizational design where task-force teams were the primary mode of operation. Such exploratory research is essential for the adequate formulation of issues to be examined in future, in-depth studies.

A number of pertinent ideas and questions, however, have been generated by this research which lead to some interesting speculations that both future project researchers and project managers might take into consideration. For example, what is the effect of having a loosely structured administrative operation when the organizations's primary focus is upon multiple task-force teams? It is quite possible that such looseness results in a feeling of job autonomy, participative decision-making and a high degree of information exchange among all personnel. For a research and development setting this might be essential. As Morse and Lorsch suggest, where the task is uncertain and requires extensive problem-solving, ". . . organizations that are less formalized and emphasize self-control and member participation in decision-making are more effective."[11]

On the other hand, a low degree of structure might also have negative consequences,[12] such as: 1) lack of direction and control, 2) poor coordination of effort, and 3) lack of information on organizational goals and role expectations. Without specified lines of authority and, therefore, channels of communication, a consistent flow of essential information might be inhibited. In turn, such administrative necessities as proper staff utilization and priority-setting may suffer.

The question arises then as to whether a "task-force" organization has to take the bad with the good? In order to assure "freedom from rigid supervision" and "freedom to make one's own decision," so necessary for the creative work of a research and development employee, must the necessary degree of looseness be accompanied by ambiguity and confusion?

The obvious answer is "No." It is quite possible to imagine a division where work centers around multiple project teams with the primary authority for a contract's execution and completion resting with the project leader AND where administrative operations center around specified managers with clearly delineated duties. "Managers" is perhaps a bad choice of words because of its connotative relation to a traditional hierarchy. "Facilitator" or "Coordinator" might be a better title. In any case, the role of a Facilitator would be to insure the flow of

information between project leaders and between the larger organization and all divisional personnel.[13]

The precise role of a Facilitator needs further conceptualization, but the idea itself may offer a solution to the negative consequences of the loosely structured administration of a task-force organization. It also raises a question as to whether a "manager," as in the division under study, can work simultaneously as a project leader, project member, and administrative coordinator without an adverse effect upon delineation of responsibility and information exchange? It would seem that if the Facilitator role were introduced, it would be a full-time responsibility. Furthermore, it should not be confounded by the individual's specific responsibilities to one project.

These are only a few of the issues that need to be raised and explored if management is to understand the strengths and weaknesses in using project team operations and other new organizational designs. Hopefully, this paper will inspire other communication researchers to investigate the area so that management will not have to learn by trial and error alone.

## FOOTNOTES

[1]Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 124-151.

[2]Warren Bennis, Changing Organizations (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966), pp. 3-14.

[3]John J. Morse and Jay W. Lorsch, "Beyond Theory Y," Harvard Business Review (May - June, 1970), p. 68.

[4]Harold J. Leavitt, Managerial Psychology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 385.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Toffler, Future Shock, p. 117.

[7]John M. Stewart, "Making Project Management Work," Business Horizons (Fall, 1965), p. 55.

[8]Not all subjects responded to every part of the questionnaire.

[9]The responses of the managers and non-managers are combined in the remainder of the results because of their similarity.

[10]The total, cumulative percentage is greater than 100 because some subjects responded with multiple answers.

[11]Morse and Lorsch, "Beyond Theory Y," p. 62.

[12]It is interesting to note that the research and development division in this study differed significantly from the successful one studied by Morse and Lorsch in two respects: 1) in the former, coordination of effort on the task-force team was an important factor, perceived as facilitating the work situation, while in Morse and Lorsch's group, coordination was not required because of the emphasis upon individual projects; and 2) the time orientation of the division under study was in terms of multiple, one-month projects, while Morse and Lorsch's successful research division participated in longer-term projects.

[13]Lorsch and Lawrence's "Integrator" may provide further insights into such an innovative role even though their emphasis is not on task-force designs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bennis, Warren. Changing Organizations. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966.

Lawrence, Paul and Lorsch, Jay. "New Management Job: The Integrator." Harvard Business Review (November - December, 1967), pp. 142-151.

Leavitt, Harold J. Managerial Psychology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

Morse, John J. and Lorsch, Jay W. "Beyond Theory Y." Harvard Business Review (May - June, 1970), pp. 61-68.

Stewart, John M. "Making Project Management Work." Business Horizons (Fall, 1965), pp. 54-68.

Toffler, Alvin. Future Shock. New York: Random House, 1970.